

Teaching Tips

Teaching Vocabulary

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Vocabulary teaching is probably one of the most important and most ignored segments of language teaching. We expect our students to use all sorts of grammar rules and communicative functions, but we often forget to give them opportunities to learn sufficient vocabulary to be able to use what they learn. As Michael McCarthy says:

It is the experience of most language teachers that the single, biggest component of any language course is vocabulary. No matter how well the student learns grammar, no matter how successfully the sounds of L2 are mastered, without words to express a wide range of meanings, communication in an L2 just cannot happen in any meaningful way. And yet vocabulary often seems to be the least systematized and the least well catered for of all the aspects of learning a foreign language. (p. x)

There are many techniques that can be shown to students to help them improve their vocabulary and, of course, each student should choose the strategy that best fits his/her learning style:

Resourcing	Using target language reference materials such as dictionaries, encyclopedias, or textbooks.
Repetition	Imitating a language model, including overt practice and silent rehearsal.
Grouping	Classifying words, terminology, or concepts according to their attributes
Imagery	Using visual images (either mental or actual) to understand or remember new information
Auditory representation	Playing back in one's mind the sound of a word, phrase, or longer language sequence.
Keyword method	Remembering a new word by identifying a familiar word in the first language that sounds like or otherwise resembles the new word.
Transfer	Using previous linguistic knowledge or prior skills to assist comprehension or production.

(Adapted from O'Malley and Chamot.)

Let's look at what we, as teachers, can do to help students practice to use these strategies for learning vocabulary.

Resourcing	Using target language reference materials such as dictionaries, encyclopedias, or textbooks and other resources.
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Students should be asked to go beyond their textbook. The use of other forms of language input can help them increase their vocabulary. Besides, by letting them choose what they want to read or what they need to investigate, they will more readily acquire necessary vocabulary that interests them.

Repetition	Imitating a language model, including overt practice and silent rehearsal.
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Encourage students to practice new vocabulary both silently and out loud. Incorporation of new vocabulary words into a dialogue or oral practice can facilitate this. As students plan their conversations, they say the words and hear them from their partners; they are learning them, effortlessly.

Grouping	Classifying words, terminology, or concepts according to their attributes
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Studies of how vocabulary is stored in the brain have shown that it is organized by categories. You can demonstrate this by using the famous word association test, so often used as a parlor game: You say a word and your partner says the first thing that comes into his/her head. For example, if I say *black*, you probably will say *white*; if I say *apple*, you might think *banana*, etc.

How can we use this in the classroom? Old fashioned word category lists. Instead of using them in the same way they were once used (translate and memorize), but we will present vocabulary in categories, for example, parts of the body, foods, rooms, etc. Also, present adjectives with their opposites (high/low, tall/short).

Imagery	Using visual images (either mental or actual) to understand or remember new information
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Present new vocabulary with visuals whenever possible. A simple translation of a new word helps students understand at that moment, but it does nothing to help them remember the word. I can answer a student's question, "What is sheep?" by saying "*Oveja*," but they will remember my poor picture of the animal drawn on the board longer.

Auditory representation	Playing back in one's mind the sound of a word, phrase, or longer language sequence.
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Encourage students to listen to words in their minds. They can practice conversations or even have practice conversations silently. These repetitions will help them remember.

Keyword method	Remembering a new word by identifying a familiar word in the first language that sounds like or otherwise resembles the new word.
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This technique is similar to Robert W. Blair's *Easification*. When confronted with having to learn Russian, he suggested the following:

Zdrástvujite

Hello!

... it sounds like STRAWS TO WITCH YA. Not STRAYS to witch ya, but STRAWS to witch ya. Got that? Imagine people greeting each other by exchanging straws and saying, STRAWS TO WITCH YA. It means "hello". Make a sign of greeting now and say it. Now listen to the tape. Did you notice there's only a couple of little differences between the English sound-alike phrase and the native Russian? For example, it's ZDRAWS, not STRAWS. (p. 221)

Transfer	Using previous linguistic knowledge or prior skills to assist comprehension or production.
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Here we show the students that they can rely on what they know of English or Spanish or any other language to help them understand and learn new words. Whenever they find themselves either having to understand some new word or needing to produce an idea for which they do not have sufficient vocabulary, they should trust cognates (very few are false), word building through affixing and suffixing, and even slang expressions they might have learned in songs. Encourage students to supply vocabulary for their classmates and don't let them get by just translating for each other. Trying to describe the meaning of a word without recurring to Spanish is a great strategy building activity.

By helping students have confidence in their own abilities and giving them study options, vocabulary building becomes much easier. In future issues we will be giving more ideas on how you can help students build their vocabularies, painlessly.

References

- Blair, Robert W. "Easification." *Innovative Approaches to Language Teaching*. Robert W. Blair, ed. Newbury House. 1982. pp. 218-225.
- McCarthy, Michael. *Vocabulary*. Oxford University Press, 1990.
- O'Malley, J. Michael and Anna Uli Chamot. *Learning Strategies in Second Language Acquisition*. Cambridge University Press, 1990.